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ABSTRACT

This practicum was designed to provide low-achieving first graders with the opportunity to improve their concept of what a word is and motivate children to become more enthusiastic about the reading process. Cooperative learning, cross-age tutoring, and skill-oriented instruction were utilized in the classroom during the 3-month period to accomplish the practicum outcomes. Assessment tools and surveys were used in collecting data. Outcomes were accomplished successfully. Analysis of the data revealed that through the use of various strategies, the 10 children involved improved word conceptualization, positively changed their attitude toward reading and enhanced their self-esteem. (Contains 34 references and four tables of data. Appendixes presents sample big book lessons and the attitude toward reading survey instrument.) (Author/RS)

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Improving Word Conceptualization of First Grade Low Achievers through the Use of Diverse Instructional Strategies

by

S. Darlene Atkinson

Cluster 61

A Practicum I Report Presented to the
Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

1995

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PRACTICUM APPROVAL SHEET

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Approved:

Apr. 26, 1995

Date of Final Approval of Report

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ABSTRACT

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This practicum was designed to provide low-achieving first graders with the opportunity to improve their concept of what a word is and motivate children to become more enthusiastic about the reading process.

Cooperative learning, cross-age tutoring, and skill-oriented instruction were utilized in the classroom during the three-month period to accomplish the practicum outcomes. Assessment tools and surveys were used in collecting data.

Outcomes of this practicum were accomplished successfully. Analysis of the data revealed that through the use of various strategies, children improved word conceptualization, positively changed their attitude toward reading and enhanced their self-esteem.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Description of Community

The work setting was an elementary school in a small school district in a neighborhood of a small southeastern city. The total population is 8,000. Despite the industrialization, agriculture is still a vital part of the economy. Because of depressed prices, decreased demand, increasing operating costs, and excessively unfavorable weather over the last decade, the future of agriculture does not seem as bright as it once did.

The school district consists of 15 elementary, 6 junior high, and 5 high schools. The district also includes four exceptional education centers separate from the other school settings. The total population of the district is 12,300. The teachers and administrators believe that all children can learn. Meeting the needs of all students is the number one priority of the district. The community is involved in the educational process and also wants the very best for the students involved.

The school was built in 1942 and was designed for about 300 students. Over the past decade, there has been an increase in the enrollment of the school and, at the present time, the school has approximately 500 students in grades 4K-5. In 1960, a primary wing was added to accommodate new growth. In 1971, a kindergarten pod was built for two

new classes. In 1982, a portable was also added to house learning disability classes. The school serves a predominantly black population with over 82% of the students receiving free or reduced breakfast and lunch.

Writer's Work Setting and Role

The writer of this practicum taught a first grade class with 15 students. The writer has a bachelor of science degree and a master's degree from Francis Marion University in Florence, SC. The writer has taught 1st through 8th grades for the past 18 years. The writer had been assigned to the practicum site for the past 13 years. The writer's teaching responsibilities included the instruction of a first grade class in all areas. The primary concern was to have students develop self-confidence and achieve at high levels of academic performance.

The writer's role involved teaching reading to first grade children using a basal text. The objective of the teacher was to help children master skills for effective reading and prepare them for standardized testing. The writer's role also involved planning a more challenging and diverse instructional program.

CHAPTER II

STUDY OF THE PROBLEM

Problem Description

The target group of incoming first graders for the 1994-95 school year were determined by diagnostic assessment as having minimal conceptualization of what a word is.

Problem Documentation

The presence of this problem was based on the assessment of 26 students recommended by the two kindergarten teachers. The target group was comprised of 10 students who were determined to have the lowest conceptualization of what a word is. Three assessment tools were used to determine concept of word. Based on the Word Concept Task (Morris, 1992) assessment tool designed to ascertain their concept of word, only 2 children out of the 10 could accurately voice-print-match a familiar passage. Utilizing the Morris-Perney Spelling Scale (Morris & Perney, 1984), 1 out of the 10 students in the target group scored within the "initial consonant only" category while the other 9 students spelled words using only random letters. Finally, the Marie Clay Vocabulary Test (Clay, 1985) was administered; only 3 out of the 10 students in the target group could write two recognizable words, including their first names.

Low-performing students needed the same opportunities to ensure success that are

given to higher achievers. More child-centered activities, rather than teacher-centered activities, needed to be available to increase these students' academic performance.

Causative Analysis

There were several factors contributing to the problem. First, the students came from low socioeconomic backgrounds. A figure (82%) which had sharply increased over the past decade was the number of students receiving free or reduced breakfast and lunch. The school was mostly made up of children from low-income families. This trend was expected to continue and increase. Secondly, there was a lack of parental involvement which minimized the intellectual stimulation of the child. An increase of working mothers and single parent homes was developing each year. As a result, these children came to school wearing their house keys around their necks so they could enter their homes. In most households, little or no adult supervision was present. In addition, the economy in the county was on a downturn, and many of our students were reporting that many of their parents were out of work. All of this was adding to their household problems and lack of resources. These students were receiving no intellectual stimulation at home and their home environments were not conducive to learning.

In January 1992, the writer's school began a comprehensive assessment of the educational needs of its children as the initial phase of planning the 1992-93 Chapter I Schoolwide Project. A Schoolwide Management Team coordinated project-planning meetings for the total school faculty, staff and parents.

Achievement records in reading and mathematics from the Stanford-8 Achievement Test (SAT-8) and the Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP), were

analyzed for the children at this school and compared to averages for similar schools in the district and with state averages. The Chapter I reading program was required to develop an improvement plan after a deficiency was recorded in their 1989-1990 test scores. In addition, readiness data from the Cognitive Skills Assessment Battery (CSAB) given to all entering first graders was analyzed. When the scores were compared for different years it was found that the average readiness score of students had been declining since 1988.

It was clear from these data that the overwhelming majority of these students could be described as seriously educationally disadvantaged. Responses from parent, faculty, and students on the effective school survey indicated that improvement was needed at the classroom level if students were to become successful learners. Instructional techniques which promote higher-order thinking skills, creative skills, and problem-solving skills were found to be lacking. Teachers and students' corroboration showed a heavy reliance on drill and practice. Even though reading instruction was skills-oriented, the wide range of reading levels in large classes hindered the meeting of individual student needs. Class size also prohibited the use of hands-on activities in math and other content areas.

Discipline problems consumed valuable academic learning time, according to the faculty and staff. A primary need for the students was, therefore, a restructured instructional program and improved climate to include focused instruction, positive classroom management, and improved opportunities for student success.

The problem also stemmed from the 1:26 student-teacher ratio in kindergarten. Although grades 1-5 were smaller, due to the Chapter I Schoolwide Project, this was not

the case in 4-K and 5-K. Due to increased class size, teachers had less time to interact with students. Because of this, the teacher was less aware of difficulties that a child might be having academically. Many teachers were skeptical about the success of the basal program for the lower achiever. Much of their time was spent on reading and related activities of the basal program. These children need more teacher-centered and more tightly-monitored activities.

In addition, at the base of these problems was that the students did not seem to have the self-esteem needed to be successful. To be successful, a student must first believe that he or she can learn. These children needed a program that met their individual needs. In the regular classroom they were identified as deficient and this compounded their low self-esteem and impaired them intellectually. Because of the experiences that they must be involved in, the low achievers did not have the opportunity to engage in experiences that could enhance their intellectual development.

Locally-developed parent, student and teacher surveys concerning developmental guidance needs revealed many students were low in self-esteem, inadequate in social skills, and lacking in positive parent-child involvement. Other data studied by task groups as part of the needs assessment included student attendance reports, teacher attendance records, library usage data, and student grades.

The high numbers of students with low achievement scores and teacher responses surveyed were taken together to indicate low expectations for learning exhibited by the teachers and a need for improved communication between students, parents, and teachers regarding program goals and progress. Student attendance was above the average daily

attendance for similar schools. Similarly, teacher attendance was not a problem area.

A necessary component of any improvement plan is that of monitoring students and program progress. The Schoolwide Management Team continued to involve all faculty, staff, administrators, community partners, and parents in ongoing data collection task groups throughout the 1994-1995 school year.

There were differences in teaching practices, learning styles, and teacher-student reaction from one classroom to another. Teachers, in working with children, used their creativity and sensitivity to the needs of children differently. However, low achievers needed the same rich literacy experiences as their peers to be successful.

Relationship of the Problem to the Literature

Experienced teachers know there are millions of children who have difficulty in reading. A major problem in reading instruction involves ways to most effectively teach the disadvantaged child who has suffered severe economic, social or psychological deprivation and who is retarded in reading skill development.

During the past two or three decades, the term "disadvantaged" has gained common usage as a designation for all of those children who belong to predominantly minority groups and who have a long experience of social, emotional, intellectual, and physical deficiencies. The disadvantaged child may possess underdeveloped powers of language, limited and simple concepts, deficient auditory and visual discrimination skills, and lack of general background of understanding which is necessary to accomplish required academic objectives. The disadvantaged child does not have adequate models present in the environment to provide the pupil with proper stimulation for building

efficient language skills.

Cavazos (1989) suggests that, as educators, we may once have said to the parents of disadvantaged students, "Send us your children, and we will teach them to read, write, and calculate, just like anybody else." But we now know it is not that simple. Most at-risk children are in serious trouble long before they enter first grade. Many are in trouble before they are born. Parents of such children are likely to have few resources, few developed skills, and may be illiterate or in poor health. To a child deprived of learning experiences and stimulation, he will enter school already behind his counterparts. To the middle-class student, well cared for, well fed, brought up in a house full of books and talk and attention, perhaps the child of college graduates, school seems a natural extension of the world that the child grew up in. It is an easy transition to formal learning. But to a child not having such advantages, the world at home and the world of the classroom bear little relation to each other. In the classroom, teachers need to demand more, not less, of this child. Experience has shown that higher expectations produce higher results. Few children perform beyond what is asked of them. Schools must strengthen curricula, raise requirements, and establish specific goals to be accomplished.

Flores, Cousin, and Diaz (1991) report that the transformation of an inner-city elementary school in Los Angeles County occurred through the application of four assumptions. In brief, these assumptions are: (a) children are proficient language users; (b) learning languages should occur in rich settings, which can be regular classrooms; (c) language development can be monitored through observations in authentic settings; and (d) parents are interested and can be partners in their children's education. This effort is

described as a program that challenged teachers to question and restructure their beliefs, attitudes, and practices.

Educators must realize that forces which are instrumental in creating a proper level of motivation are missing in the lives of many children. In too many cases there is simply no reason for the child to want to reach higher levels of success in a reading skills program.

Eeds-Kniep (1979) contends that some children do seem to learn to read miraculously--it just happens. Others, however, cause teachers to pray for miracles. They are the ones whose acquisition of reading ability may be endangered by unilateral statements to teachers that sounds or words must never be presented out of context. Certainly, this may not be necessary (though hardly damaging) for the majority of children who will have no trouble learning to read. These children don't seem to need explicit instructions in sound-letter correspondence and blending skills. But some children do not find learning to read an easy task. They may learn 10 words beginning with "m" and not notice until it is pointed out that a new word begins with the same letter. It is these children that would profit from a program that makes sound-letter correspondences explicit and teach them to blend these sounds and letters into meaningful wholes. Many children who enter first grade do not automatically know words that occur with high frequency in the materials they are likely to read. These words are often ones that aren't decodable even when sound-letter correspondences and blending skills have been mastered. These readers are the focus of this practicum.

Shuy (1981) believes that the real skill of reading involves the ability to derive

various kinds of meaning from the printed page. The student who has little concept of what a word is derives very little from what is written. Allington (1994) believes that when children begin school with few experiences with books, stories or print, instructors generally confuse their lack of experience with a lack of ability. Far too often, limited-experience children are viewed as having limited potential. It is time for the educational community to take a closer look at this assumption. We, as educators, need to reemphasize the importance of the classroom teacher and classroom lessons in developing literacy in all children. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), we must not throw out the old notion of distributed learning that fostered the current approaches to instructional planning. In its place, we put the notions of engagement, involvement and flow.

In our democracy, all children are equally worth our care and concern, and all should have the equality of opportunity. The readers that were in the target group in this practicum were challenged and given the opportunity to progress. This is an essential condition of education because continued efforts to learn depend on the feeling that progress is being made and success is possible. Many students who enter first grade with no "concept of word" are coming from a print-deficient environment. There is no value placed on reading and very little communication between parent and child. The writer purposely kept this fact in mind throughout the implementation period of the practicum. The target group may not have had the same advantages that many students have had and taken for granted.

CHAPTER III

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

Goals and Expectations

The goal of the practicum was that the children would improve their concept of what a word is. Strategies were implemented to assist students to voice-print-match a familiar passage on the Word Concept Task (Morris, 1992), to produce invented spellings at the "early letter name" stage on the Morris-Perney Spelling Scale (Morris & Perney, 1984), and increase the mean number of words that they can successfully write in 10 minutes using the Clay Vocabulary Test (Clay, 1985).

Expected Outcomes

Upon completion of the 12-week implementation period for this practicum, at least 7 out of 10 targeted students were projected to voice-print-match a familiar passage on the Word Concept Task (Morris, 1992). Six of the 10 students would produce invented spellings at the "early letter name" stage on the Morris-Perney Spelling Scale (Morris & Perney, 1984). All 10 students in the target group would increase the number of words that they could successfully write in 10 minutes using the Clay Vocabulary Test (Clay, 1985) from 0 to 10.

Measurement of Outcomes

The first week of implementation, an informal survey was given to ascertain the reading attitude of the children. Another reading survey was administered to ascertain the reading attitude of the children close to the end of implementation. The identical instruments used during the diagnostic assessment were administered to determine progress.

CHAPTER IV

SOLUTION STRATEGY

Discussion and Evaluation of Solutions

Children must become aware that printed words have meaning or represent spoken words before formal reading instruction can begin. The target group of incoming first graders for the 1994-95 school year were determined by diagnostic assessment as having minimal conception of what a word is.

The low achiever in reading could very well be a child who has never started to learn to read. The tempo of this child is at a much lower rate for learning skills in the classroom. Often this child is functioning with a language deficiency. Their program should have concrete experiences and experiences that will help them to develop good language skills. The literature recommends several activities that will help the children benefit.

Some of the solutions that have been tried and suggested by researchers and professionals for the problem of low achievers' word conceptualization are documented in the literature.

Sanacore (1992) suggests shared reading, sharing meetings, skill groups and strategy groups as means of developing reading proficiency and fostering cooperation

between self-sufficient readers and students whose reading concepts are sub-standard. When the basal reader is used as the only vehicle for instruction, the low achiever cannot be expected to become a proficient reader. These students should have other experiences in which they become actively involved after the basal reading activity.

Meisels (1989) suggests that limiting class size, increasing adult supervision through the use of aides and tutors, and utilizing cooperative learning (cross-age and specific grouping) may improve students' conceptualization of basic word recognition. Specifically trained teachers working with small groups of children may help to reduce the risk of failure that threatens many low-achieving first grade students.

Juel (1990) reports that grouping students regardless of overall group characteristics positively impacts reading improvement during the period in which students acquire basic reading skills. Pupils of widely varying achievement in a classroom will not profit equally from the same procedures applied to the group as a whole. Grouping is a device which permits teachers to work with a smaller number of students who have similar instructional needs.

Sippola (1988), by comparing listen-read, listen-alone and read-alone procedures of instruction, found that low-level readers benefitted most from the listen-read method of instruction, resulting in improved word recognition skills. Listening and reading are the receptive language processes through which a large part of the school curriculum must pass on its way to becoming learning. Phonics instruction should be a major component of any reading instructional program; it should be simple and aimed at helping students develop decoding strategies which will enhance their ability to recognize new words

(Commission on Reading, 1985). Phonetic analysis is an important method of learning words not known as sight words. The teaching of phonics should be integrated with the teaching of other techniques for learning unknown words.

Hollingsworth (1983) notes that in a study of 100 first-grade students, phonemic awareness was the best predictor of word recognition skills, and is necessary, but that other factors such as auditory readiness are also necessary for reading success. To determine the factors accounting for children's growth in decoding skills, this study examined school entering characteristics--age, sex, ethnicity, and developmental abilities--and school-influenced skills and characteristics--phonemic awareness, letter-name knowledge, basal text, and place in series--of approximately 100 first grade students.

Winsor and Pearson (1992), in a study of 20 at-risk first graders, found that phonemic awareness alone is not adequate for developing concept of word, but that repetitive reading of familiar materials contributes to development of phonemic awareness. This study examined the development of phonemic awareness and its relationship to beginning reading among first-grade children at risk for failing to learn to read and write. Their instructional programs were observed, their levels of reading, writing, and phonemic awareness were measured and their home literacy experiences were surveyed by questionnaire.

Johnson and Johnson (1985), by analyzing the results of 122 studies, found abundant evidence supporting the validity of cooperative learning. A meta-analysis of all the studies that have been conducted in this area reveals that cooperative learning experiences tend to promote higher achievement in social skills rather than more

competitive and individualistic learning experiences.

According to Meyer et al. (1992), teachers who spend more time reading aloud to students spend less time on teaching activities which would lead to concrete reading achievement. Reading aloud to children will awaken their sleeping imaginations and improve their deteriorating language skills. When a teacher reads aloud, it improves the atmosphere of the classroom. When it is done at home, it improves the quality of family life. But wherever it is done, the overwhelming result is that it improves children's attitudes towards books and reading.

Vann (1991) indicates that in a half-day kindergarten program, there are many time-consuming routines, and this leaves little time for daily language experience. Learning to read is probably one of the most important accomplishments that a child will achieve during his formal schooling. This is not to imply that learning to read will be his most difficult or dramatic academic achievement, for if he gets off to a good start the whole process may be so uneventful that he will not recall how his particular learning took place. On the other hand, if he fails in reading, the frustrations and defeats which beset him in the future are so numerous and varied that they have never been tabulated in one source. Thus, the experiences which the school arranges for children prior to launching into the formal teaching of reading are extremely important. Many of these experiences will take place in kindergarten. Therefore, the quality time a kindergarten teacher has to spend with each child is vital.

Allen, Michalove and Shockley (Moyers, 1993) discovered that at-risk readers are sometimes faced with a variety of instabilities (e.g. family mobility or remediation for

disabled students) that affect their progress in learning to read.

Substantiating previous research findings, Yaden (1984) indicated that beginning readers may still test poorly on indicators of print awareness (including concepts of letters, words, and punctuation marks) even after a year of reading instruction. It was also noted that children demonstrate certain confusions about print conventions and that above-average readers perform better on measures that assess knowledge of print conventions than do poorer readers.

Matthews and Siebert (1983) concluded that the learning environment is as important as the curriculum when remediating children in reading; they created an atmosphere in which all children could experience success. Mood is an important factor in reading. If a child is relaxed and happy, then he will be more receptive.

Manning and Lucking (1991) concluded in their research that cooperative learning teams increase students' self-esteem by feeling liked by peers and experiencing academic accomplishment. Over the past 14 years many studies have been published examining achievement and the powerful impact cooperative learning can have on achievement when well implemented. Studies comparing cooperative and competitive learning and cooperative and individualistic learning show the results of all studies favor cooperative over cooperative and individualistic learning. The studies were primarily field experimental studies in which students were randomly assigned to conditions, teachers were rotated across conditions, and the conditions were observed daily to ensure that such were appropriately implemented. The studies took place in primary, intermediate, junior high and senior high schools, and college classes. The studies were conducted in more

than one subject area: math, social studies, science, reading and language arts, geography/mapping, physical education, music education and languages. Along with academic achievement, studies were also conducted in the areas of enhanced social skills and the improvement of self-esteem. These research studies have provided convincing evidence that cooperative learning, when properly implemented, can contribute positively to academic achievement, social skills, and self-esteem (Manning & Lucking, 1991).

Results of the research on cooperative learning experiences are of great significance. A meta-analysis of all the studies that have been conducted in the area reveals that cooperative learning experiences tend to promote higher achievement in social skills rather than do competitive and individualistic learning experiences. These results hold for all age levels, for all subject areas, and for all tasks involving critical thinking skills in concept attainment, verbal problem solving, categorization, spatial problem solving, retention and memory, and guessing-judging-predicting (Johnson & Johnson, 1985).

Cooperative learning promotes the use of higher reasoning strategies and greater thinking competencies more than do competitive and individualistic learning strategies while promoting more positive attitudes toward both subject area and the instructional experience. Students are better able to work in harmony and cooperation with each other while mastering collaborative competencies at a higher level than do students studying competitively or individualistically. Cooperative learning also fosters higher levels of self-esteem, basic self-acceptance, greater cognitive and affective perspective-taking in perceiving the teacher and peers as cooperative and supportive (Johnson & Johnson,

1985).

Research concludes that cooperative learning teams increase students' self-esteem. Some important components of self-esteem include feeling liked by peers and experiencing academic accomplishment, and research indicates that cooperative learning addresses these components (Manning & Lucking, 1991).

Cooperative learning may lead to increased self-esteem because students have more friends and have more positive feelings about peers, school experiences and academic achievements (Slavin, 1989). Students in a typical competitive classroom become either winners or losers, with the latter developing negative attitudes toward themselves and school. With cooperative learning, students see each other as academically and socially competent colleagues rather than competitors. Improved recognition of peers promotes better interpersonal relationships and leads in turn to increased self-esteem (Towson, 1985).

There are several expedient grouping techniques of cooperative learning experiences used in the subject area classroom. The following would pertain:

1. Group retellings
2. Needs grouping
3. The buddy system
4. Interest grouping
5. Ability grouping
6. Tutorial grouping
7. Social grouping

8. Team-assisted grouping

9. Base group (Wood, 1987, p. 10-12).

Through the use of team-assisted instruction (TAI), research shows this approach has positive effects on student achievement, behavioral ratings, and student attitudes. The methods of importance are self or partner checking, frequent mastery checks allowing the students to skip material already understood, and such curriculum materials not needed. In modifying the curriculum, additional items are included for each step. Students work the items in blocks of four and proceed to the next step only if four items in the block are correct. This allows the students to see and correct individual errors in most cases and therefore makes it impossible for students to go on to the next step without mastering the previous one (Slavin, 1989).

Team-assisted instruction such as tutorial grouping can be employed when the teacher feels that students can benefit from one-on-one assistance. The tutorial system involves two students working together to assist and be responsible for each other's learning. Teachers may tell students to pair up in pre-assigned tutorial groups for completion of an assignment, problems or end-of-chapter review. The tutoring pairs could be students who are similar in terms of ability and, yet, sufficiently disparate academically and socially/behaviorally to benefit from each other's aid (Wood, 1989).

Towson (1985) suggests that in a cooperative learning classroom students see each other as academically and socially competent colleagues, rather than competitors, which leads in turn to increased self-esteem. Also, improved recognition of peers promotes better interpersonal relationships and leads in turn to increased self-esteem. Slavin (1989)

maintains that when low-achieving students work in a cooperative learning group, they have more positive feelings about peers, school experiences and academic achievement. Cooperative learning should be used when we want students to learn more, like school better, and learn more effective social skills.

Morton Deutsch formulated a theory during the late 1940s on how students can interact with each other while learning. The three goal structures that were identified for this purpose included cooperative, competitive, and individualistic. In a cooperative interaction pattern, individuals seek outcomes that are beneficial to all. In a competitive situation, individuals can achieve goals only if other individuals are not accomplishing goals. Last, in an individualistic situation, there is no relationship between individuals' goals attainment. Therefore, individuals are concerned only about one's own achievements and ignore the attempts of others (Wood, 1987).

Recent research has attempted to extend the cooperative learning theory to the classroom and to similar classroom instructional situations. As most of the research has taken place in the classroom, teachers have been the implementers of the cooperative learning experiences (Leming & Hollfield, 1985).

The validity of using cooperative learning experiences in the classroom has been attested to in voluminous research. Johnson and Johnson (1985) found positive effects through the analyses of the results of 122 studies. The research consistently indicates that students in cooperative learning situations score higher on achievement tests than students learning by other methods. Further, the results of these analyses point to other advantages for cooperative learning. Among these are the following:

1. Higher motivation to learn and greater intrinsic motivation. Being urged on by one's peer rather than competing with them seems to be the more encouraging and socially rewarding experience.
2. More positive attitudes toward instruction and the instructors.
3. Improvement of both tutor and tutee. Teachers have long known that the best way to learn a subject well is by having to teach it to others. Since allowing students to work together is a socially rewarding experience, attitudes toward work in general are improved.
4. Increases self-esteem. Group learning experiences are positively associated with improved student self-perceptions.
5. More positive perceptions about the intentions of others. After the cooperative learning experiences students begin to perceive their peers as more caring and helpful than before.
6. Decrease of competitive goal structures. Students begin to realize the learning of others can increase, rather than inhibit, their own learning.
7. Greater acceptance of differences. Grouping students who would not ordinarily seek out each other's company seems to result in a lessening of prejudices and a broader understanding and tolerance of others' differences.
8. Decrease of dependence on the teacher. Apparently students become more aware of their own capacity for problem solving. (Johnson & Johnson, 1985)

Meisels (1989) suggests that decreased class size contributes to improved

individualized instruction. Also, Matthews and Siebert (1983) maintain that a structured approach designed to help remedial students focus on the task, control their self-defeating behaviors, and produce continuous success will work splendidly. For these students, the learning environment is almost as important as the curriculum. Teachers should create an atmosphere in which all children will experience continuous success. Beginning with whole group and response in unison will help minimize failure for the weaker students since the stronger students will initially carry the entire group. A cooperative group spirit will enable slower learners to increase sight word vocabularies and read with greater fluency and comprehension.

Hollingsworth (1983) found that first grade students who are engaged in more letter-sound instruction will show more spelling and reading improvement. A phonemics-reading approach is considered as being one in which practice is given first in auditory discrimination of the sounds of the letters separately and in combination, followed by practice in associating individual letter sounds with the printed gramphemes and finally in reading materials that are structured to contain the sounds being studied.

Sippola (1988) believes that students of low ability trained in the listen-read procedure will increase their overall word recognition. Also, he maintains that speech-to-print phonics is also effective in the instructional program to lead to the development of concept of word. Through the use of this strategy, the child is able to tie the phonemes to their printed forms and to combine the sounds in sequence into words.

Overall, a method that emphasizes earlier and more systematic instruction in phonics tends to produce readers who learn to identify printed words earlier than those

methods that stress whole word instruction. Apparently, an initial systematic code emphasis helps children discover the regularities of the letter-sound correspondences in our language, and this leads to an early superiority in word recognition skills. This holds true more often for children of low and average ability than for those of high ability. In general, it appears that more able students learn to read well by either method of instruction--one that emphasizes code or meaning. An early and highly structured emphasis on letter-sound correspondences enables students to become more proficient at identifying new words.

Juel (1990) contends that group placement positively affects reading achievement. It has an adverse effect on reading development only after children have acquired basic reading skills. Grouping is a device which permits teachers to work with a smaller number of pupils who have similar instructional needs. Several factors which relate to grouping in the primary grades should be kept in mind.

First, it is to be expected that some pupils will make substantial gains in reading during a period of weeks or months in the primary years. Therefore, neither reliance on a single initial diagnosis nor a rigid grouping arrangement would be desirable. Diagnosis must be ongoing and grouping practices flexible. Second, the range of pupil abilities will inevitably place some children at the extremes of the achievement continuum outside of the conventional three-group or even a four-group structure. Fitting instruction to these extreme individual differences will call for a supply of materials at many difficulty levels and a variety of approaches to any given instructional objective. Third, since the total reading process is composed of a great number of related but specific skills, it is likely that

some children will belong in one group when achievement in one skill is the criterion and in other groups for other instructional purposes. Few children, for example, will be equally deficient--or proficient--in phonic analysis, comprehension of what is read, and appreciation of literature (Heilman, 1961).

Towson (1985) maintains that cooperativeness is positively related to self-esteem, and self-esteem in a classroom connects students to the group. Students can interact freely on a general level. It is also the contention of Slavin (1989) and Wood (1987) that average students can be motivated in groups. It also allows the teacher more personal contact with each student while going from group to group.

Description of Selected Solutions

The literature offered an array of possible solutions to improve word conceptualization of first grade low achievers. One of the first premises of this paper was that positive reinforcement was highly related to vocabulary development, concept of word and students' attitude towards reading. In addition to the research discussed in the previous pages, other sources influenced the writer's choice of a solution strategy. The school staff and the writer both thought that using positive reinforcement would be a challenging and innovative idea to use. Additional research, which confirmed the writer's choice of a solution strategy, was analyzed before beginning the study.

The writer, after reviewing much of the literature and the techniques for increasing the success of failing students, chose the tutorial system as described by Wood (1987) and Johnson (1984) as a promising technique for improving the success of targeted students. For the purpose of the practicum, the writer decided to pair proficient third grade readers

with the students in the target group. In the tutorial system technique, two students who are compatible socially and emotionally worked together on a reading assignment. The students paired were similar enough, however, so that both learned from the experience, yet, one student was slightly proficient in order to provide direction and assistance when needed. Ideally, an entire school could adopt the peer-tutorial philosophy and provide resources and teacher training inservices, and, above all, recognition for those that participate (Wood, 1987).

The tutorial system technique was chosen by the writer for the following reasons:

1. The tutorial system technique allowed students to receive individual attention and one-on-one teaching.

2. The tutorial system technique allowed low-achieving students the opportunity to practice appropriate cooperative social interactions.

3. The tutorial system technique was introduced for the first time at the practicum site and enabled other teachers to preview this system for future use.

4. The tutorial system technique did not add any extra costs other than normal daily pupil allocations. The tutorial system technique did not require added equipment nor materials in order to be successful.

The writer functioned as a guide and facilitator, organizing, operating and directing the cooperative learning experience. The writer was responsible for surveying and interviewing the tutor and tutee according to compatibility, proficiency and desirability to work together in a cooperative learning experience. The tutors from the third grade were trained by the writer in exactly how they would work with the students in the target group

during the week prior to the implementation period. The tutors worked for 30 minutes daily with the tutees for the 12-week implementation period. They worked on weak areas identified by the writer until the mastery level was determined in the achievement process.

A critical component in this practicum was to elicit support from teachers and staff. Everyone was very receptive and willing to help in this endeavor.

Skill-oriented instruction that includes daily exercises focusing on phonemic awareness and voice-print-match skills were a vital part of this practicum. The approaches the writer used were as follows:

1. Focused Literary Discussion - The discussion was in small literary discussion groups or whole class. Each student brought to the session a book currently being read during self-selected reading time (SSR). The teacher or a student (if in small groups) led the discussion of one literary element per day (setting, character, plot, etc.). Students read a sentence or two to support his answer concerning the literary element. Right after SSR was determined to be the best time for the discussion.

2. Shared Reading - A new book, poem, song or short literature selection was introduced on Monday. On successive days of the week, the teacher led students in rereading the selection of the week. The teacher focused on at least one teaching point per day, often using sentence strips to help make the point.

3. Make Words Session - Students received a packet of cutup letters (vowels are colored) that would spell a meaningful word from the literature selection of the week. The teacher led the student in making 10-12 other words from these letters, modeling along the way, so that everyone was successful on every word. Students were led to

discover such things as pattern words (can, fan), anagrams (eat, tea), phonetic generalizations (cap, cape), structural elements (cap, caps), and use of capital/lowercase (pat, Pat). The session ended on Friday by using all the letters to make the big word of the week. Students then sorted the words according to a teacher-directed focus such as: rhyming words, phonetic generalization, alphabetical order, etc. (Allington & Cunningham, 1994).

4. Writing in Response to Reading - The students were led through a writing activity that took many forms. They made a list, wrote a page for a book they completed during the week, wrote a sentence strip, made an invitation, etc. The writing related to the literature selection of the week and was an appropriate response. (Student work was displayed in the room.)

Through the use of cooperative learning groups, the teacher was able to break away from the class and focus individually on the students in the target group. This one-on-one instruction was vital to the success of this practicum. Strategies were used by each teacher to help the student in understanding what a word is. Once the child figured out what a word was, they usually grasped the alphabetic principle shortly thereafter, and they were well on their way to being good readers and writers.

The solution strategies were chosen according to the bibliographical research. The teacher conducted a read-aloud story time which included storybooks, poetry books, and books written by the children. Each child had an individual folder with his/her work to share with parents on a daily basis. The contents of the folder were also shared with parents during parent-teacher conferences to suggest ways that they could help their

children at home to become more proficient readers. The following strategies focused on motivating the child to read. Parents were invited to serve as speakers in the classroom to enhance the overall reading program and excite the children about the experience of reading. On a typical day, ten out of the ten children were asked to read a book when assignments were completed. When the children were asked about their favorite stories they had heard or read during the week, all of them mentioned several titles.

Throughout the 12 weeks, the students were complimented verbally as a technique to motivate them to read more. "Good job," "nice," and "great work" were some examples. During the following weeks, small rewards were added as incentives to do their very best. Throughout the 12 weeks, their attitude toward reading changed drastically and their overall performance improved as they became more focused in their work. An effort was made to add an abundance of books to the classroom library. Daily, the students were adding to the number of words that they knew well and that they could provide for themselves when they were reading and writing.

The students were given a tutor from the third grade in the third week of the implementation period. These students were great in every way. It almost seemed that the students knew exactly when their tutor was to come and they anticipated their arrival with joy.

The whole group instruction was a procedure that was helpful for implementation. The four components of this approach were focused on literary discussion, shared reading, a make word session, and writing in response to reading. Methods were used to give the children individual experiences with understanding the concept of word.

Cooperative learning was used constantly as the students worked with a buddy reading aloud to each other and creating writing that they shared and were proud of. Through the use of this technique, the students were provided with opportunities to acquire an appreciation for literature, expand their vocabulary and become familiar with story structure.

The students read poems daily and touched each word as they said it. An informal assessment was done by the teacher to ensure that the students in the target group had a concept of what a word was. Special emphasis was given to phonemic awareness and voice-print-match.

Activities that focused entirely on building self-confidence added to the overall success of this practicum. Many different strategies and constant one-on-one time with the students in the target group enabled the teacher to make absolutely sure that the students were strengthening their understanding of what a word is.

Report of Action Taken

The solution strategy for this practicum began in January, 1995, after receiving approval to begin the implementation phase of the practicum. Soon after the approval was obtained, the principal and the writer's verifier were consulted. The supplies and other associated materials were accumulated, and the writer made the essential arrangements to begin.

The first week of the implementation began with an informal attitude toward reading survey (see Appendix B) to ascertain the children's attitudes toward reading. Parents became involved and increased the quality time spent at home reading with their

child. It was beneficial for students that parents and teachers worked together to make the program more meaningful.

The second week of the solution strategy introduced motivational techniques to stimulate children to read. The classroom had a variety of reading choices for students. Books were displayed so that students found them intriguing. The reading area was arranged so that it was comfortable and inviting. The writer asked the children to share something that they had read. They shared a poem, story, or book that they had found enjoyable. They were not pressured to share orally, but they were given an option of showing a picture that was funny, exciting, or sad. The children were encouraged to write creatively, expressing their feelings using their imagination and experiences. They also had experiences constructing objects that represented some of the stories that they had read.

The third week of the solution strategy introduced the third grade tutors to the students in the target group. Whole group instruction was also utilized. Beginning with 15-minute blocks of time, children had integrated work and worked in small groups. Also, beginning with 30-minute blocks of time, children engaged in conversing with the teacher or students about their work. Parents were encouraged to participate in the class activity. The tutors were an integral part of the day as they read with the children during their sustained silent reading time. They shared experiences and made each child feel special and appreciated.

In the fourth week, the children began the buddy system. They read aloud to each other. The classroom reflected equality. They understood that their contributions were

accepted. After their reading activities, they were encouraged to collaborate on their writing assignments and to work in pairs. They wrote notes and personal stories reflecting on their feelings, actions, and thoughts.

The fifth week focused on Big Books. Instruction provided students with the opportunity for practicing good conversational skills. They enjoyed this time and it provided them with opportunities to acquire appreciation for literature, expand their vocabulary, and become familiar with story structure. The students shared book experiences by reading from Big Books, which helped them experience rich language, stimulated their imagination, and motivated them to read and write. Three of the lessons the writer used are included (see Appendix A).

The sixth week consisted of the writer reading picture books to the students and giving them an opportunity to point to words as they were read. The students then recited a familiar poem and touched each word as they said it. A lot of time was allotted for this activity to ensure that the weaknesses in word conceptualization were addressed.

The seventh week continued to focus on small cooperative groups completing activities that focused on skills related to concept of word with special emphasis on phonemic awareness and voice-print-match. Students continued to read at home and share their experiences with tutors. The individual attention from the tutors fostered a discovery in the students that led to a new understanding of themselves and others. This led them to cooperate and communicate more in the classroom community.

The eighth week focused on a parent workshop to encourage parents to become learners with their children. The presenters demonstrated ways of reinforcing what their

child learns at school. Each parent was given strategies to help children build their self-confidence. Parents were invited to visit the class anytime.

The ninth week focused on the child and his/her feelings. They were given the opportunity to share their interests, problems, and fears. The students showed growth in their speaking and overall progress in language development. The students continued to read Big Books and share with their classmates in various ways. They were using language better, and their self-concept was strengthened.

The tenth week was sprinkled with activities in which the students expressed themselves by cooperatively creating a big book to accompany any small book that had been covered during the first few months of school. This was a great way for the students to express themselves and when the writer displayed their work in the hall, they were proud and excited.

The eleventh week was filled with whole group instruction relating to concept of word. After the writer introduced the lesson, she worked one-on-one with the students in the target group to assess if there were still weaknesses that must be addressed to further strengthen their understanding of concept of word. There was little to be done. The students had progressed just as expected.

The final week involved the evaluation of the implementation period. The students had a final session with their tutors, and the tutors were given a small token of appreciation for a job well done. The writer was sure that the cross-age tutoring was a great strategy for increasing not only word conceptualization, but also increasing self-esteem. The writer evaluated the 10 students by using the same three instruments utilized

in the assessment prior to the formation of the target group (see Tables 1, 2, and 3).

All of the 10 children chose to read during their free activity time. This was a positive sign for students who wanted nothing to do with books at the beginning of the school year. Parents were consulted and the writer discussed their child's progress during the three-month implementation. Everyone was delighted with the positive changes that had taken place.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS, DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISSEMINATION

Results

The problem that existed in this writer's work setting was that the target group of incoming first graders for the 1994-95 school year were determined by diagnostic assessment as having minimal conceptualization of what a word is. The low-performing students needed the same opportunities to ensure success that were given to the high achievers. These students were being lost in the shuffle. More child-centered activities rather than teacher-centered activities needed to be available to increase the academic performance of these students.

These students came from low socioeconomic backgrounds and there was very little parental involvement. It was obvious that they had no intellectual stimulation at home. To add to this, the instructional techniques that were being used in reading were found to be lacking. Even though reading instruction was skills oriented, the wide range of reading levels in large classes hindered the meeting of individual student needs. Class size also prohibited the use of any hands-on activities that the low-achieving students needed desperately.

The teachers had little time to interact with students. Because of this, the teacher

was not aware of difficulties that these children were having. Also lacking in these students was positive self-esteem. They had no belief in their ability to succeed.

There were differences in teaching practices, learning styles, and teacher-student reaction from one classroom to another. Low achievers were not receiving the type of instruction they needed. Teachers in working with children use their creativity, communication, and sensitivity to the needs of children differently. Some of these teacher's activities were inconsistent with the integration of learning styles.

The solution to the problem was to provide skill-oriented instruction that focused on phonemic awareness and voice-print-match skills. Also, cooperative learning groups were used as well as cross-age tutoring. Repetition was provided that emphasized skills and experiences that helped the student develop good language skills. They were able to experience collaborative writing strategies and a literature-based classroom with rich situations. It was evident that these children needed more opportunities to succeed in reading and word conceptualization.

Specific outcomes were designed to achieve the goal. The following list includes each outcome and the results related to the outcome.

Outcome 1: It was projected that at least 7 out of 10 targeted students would voice-print-match a familiar passage on the Word Concept Task (Morris, 1992). Table 1 gives the result of this outcome relating 8 out of 10 children were able to voice-print-match a familiar passage.

Outcome 2: It was projected that 6 out of 10 students would produce invented spellings at the "early letter name" stage on the Morris-Perney Spelling Scale (Morris &

Perney, 1984). Table 2 gives the result of this outcome relating 9 out of 10 students produced invented spellings at the "early letter name" stage.

Outcome 3: It was projected that all 10 students in the target group would increase the number of words they could successfully write in 10 minutes using the Clay Vocabulary Test (Clay, 1985) from 0 to 10. Table 3 gives the result of this outcome relating all 10 students increased the number of words that they could successfully write in 10 minutes from 0 to 10.

In the beginning of implementation, the Attitude Toward Reading Survey (see Appendix B) was presented to the students. Table 4 is a tabulation of the 10 students' responses to the survey. Of the 10 students shown in Table 4, it has been shown that the children have developed a positive attitude toward reading. Their responses relate that the children have reached a level that promises a potential for progress in reading. They understood that reading was fun and that through reading, they could create an imaginary world all their own.

Table 1

Word Concept Task - Summary of Responses at End of Implementation Period

Number of students = 10

Scoring range: 1 - 4

*4 pts. - Child points to each word as he says it. Student is able to voice-print-match a familiar passage.

Student	Score
1	4
2	3
3	4
4	4
5	3
6	4
7	4
8	4
9	4
10	4

Table 2

Morris-Perney Spelling Scale - Summary of Responses at End of Implementation Period

Number of students = 10

Student	Random Letter (0)	Initial Cons. (1)	Early Letter Name (2)	Letter Name (3)	Transitional (4)
1				✓	
2					✓
3				✓	
4			✓		
5				✓	
6				✓	
7				✓	
8				✓	
9					✓
10				✓	

Table 3

Clay Vocabulary Test - Summary of Responses at End of Implementation Period

Number of students = 10

Student	Words successfully written in 10 minutes
1	22
2	18
3	21
4	20
5	24
6	18
7	24
8	21
9	23
10	27

Table 4

Attitude Toward Reading Survey- Summary of Student Responses

Number of students = 10

	☺	😐	☹
1. I look like this when I read during free time	10		
2. I look like this when I read about myself	9	1	
3. I look like this when I get a book for a present	8	2	
4. I look like this when the teacher asks me questions about what I read	9		1
5. I would feel like this if I could not read		1	10

Discussion

To ascertain the consequences of this practicum, qualitative and quantitative documentation was scrutinized. The total number of children involved in this practicum was 10. The word conceptualization of the children improved, and they also gained maturity in reading. They then began to read more fluently, with expression and enthusiasm.

They were exhilarated as they read orally, practiced reading to parents and students, read independently, and discussed stories with their classmates. Through the use of the tutorial system, students were able to share what they were discovering and help each other tremendously. Motivation and an increased amount of thinking came along with all the talking and cooperating that was part of their daily procedures.

Because of the strategies, the wealth of everyday reading materials in the writer's classroom and the array of open-ended activities, students did the best work possible for them. They made choices about their own learning. Surprisingly, this made a big difference in the success of the project. Students were provided with ample experiences, in and out of the classroom, to express themselves as they progressed daily.

The writer feels that the students made great success in the three-month period. They were able to use what they had learned to strengthen their concept of what a word is.

A review and realization of the data collected related that the goals were achieved above what had even been anticipated. The results ratified the writer's anticipations that if children were given more opportunities to learn in their own way, they would become

more skilled in their intellectual development.

This project succeeded because of the following factors. More time was allotted for the disadvantaged child who has suffered severe economic, social or psychological deprivation and who is retarded in reading skill development. The children had more communication experiences, which included listening, speaking, and writing. They were encouraged to be more actively involved in the reading process by participating in activities that had more experimentation with the reading and writing processes. Their concept of word was strengthened daily through the use of an array of successful techniques. Support came from the principal, parents, and several members of the staff.

During the tenth week of implementation, the local TV station invited our district to do a 45-second commercial on the joys of reading. The writer was chosen to do the commercial. Needless to say, the students were thrilled and actually helped with the script. It is times like this that a teacher feels most rewarded.

Recommendations

Children must be able to use written and oral language throughout the day. They must be involved in discussing problems, collaborating, evaluating, and reading aloud. They must also be given opportunities to express their feelings orally and in writing.

Teachers must believe that reading and writing are wonderful and that students really do wish to join in the fun of learning and developing as literate human beings. They must realize that the built-in rewards of literacy that adults enjoy are available to students--if teachers make decisions that allow students to be part of a literary community at school. They must be dissatisfied with meaningless, canned programs and want their

classrooms to be based on literature and real-life situations.

Classrooms should have an abundance of materials for children to read: magazines, books, newspapers, comic books, and experience charts. Children must be encouraged to think, imagine, express, and succeed.

Dissemination

This practicum has been shared with, and made accessible to, the teachers, administrative staff, and parents. Several of the teachers were excited with the final phase of implementation and related how stimulating it was to see children that had been labeled as "low achievers" perform well in their activity.

The writer plans to share practicum results with other classroom teachers at in-service meetings. Finally, the writer intends to prepare articles for publication that focus on the success of the practicum strategies.

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APPENDIX A

BIG BOOK LESSONS

LESSON PLAN

TEACHER Atkinson

On a Dark and Scary Night
Title of Big Book

Literary Element	Shared Reading	Word Study	Writing
(Self-selected books) *See index card. *Illustration	Read story aloud to group after naming title, author, and illustrator. Then, read story aloud with group, using stick. FOCUS: Exclamation Point	BIG WORD: thunder he the	1. Students will discuss illustrations of story. 2. Students will write one sentence about their favorite illustration and draw a picture.
*Setting	FOCUS: Rhyming words: giggle/wiggle boo/hoo	red run	1. Discuss setting. 2. Students will write a sentence about the setting and draw a picture about the setting.
*Characters	FOCUS: Rhyming words: flash/crash flap/clap yelp/help	dune tune	Students will write sentence substituting the last word of each sentence in the stor with their own words. (innovation) Ex: Witches laugh. Witches cry
*Plot	FOCUS: Capital letters at beginning of sentences	under	
*Mood	FOCUS: Periods and question marks (Change telling sentences into questions.)	BIG WORD: thunder	Share reading, using innovated work.

LESSON PLAN

TEACHER Atkinson

NOTE: Each day, read the title, author, and illustrator to the group. Read the story aloud daily to the group. Then, have group read story aloud with you along with the pointer.

The Loudest Little Lion
Title of Big Book

Literary Element	Shared Reading	Word Study	Writing
(Self-selected books) Illustration	FOCUS: Capital letters	(whistle-Big Word) he we is his	1. Using sentence strips, have students place them in order and write the sentence/s. 2. Students will draw picture to illustrate their sentence/s.
Characters	FOCUS; "than"	let hit lit	
Setting	FOCUS: Quotation marks	tie ties list	1. Have students write two sentences about the lions 2. Students will draw pictures to illustrate their sentences.
Plot	FOCUS: Question mark	wise white	
Mood	FOCUS: Exclamation mark	Big Word: whistle	1. Discuss mood of story with students. 2. Students will draw a picture of themselves, illustrating how they felt about the story

TEACHER Darlene Atkinson

LESSON PLAN

"The Three Pigs" (library book)
Title of Big Book

Literary Element	Shared Reading	Word Study	Writing
(Self-selected books) Author	FOCUS: Directional Words: in here up down	BIG WORD: house he she	1. Students will discuss story. 2. Using sentence strips, have students substitute names of other animals in place of pigs. 3. Students will then write sentences, naming other animals.
Illustrations	FOCUS: commas	ho so	
Characters	FOCUS: Picture Words (Adjectives) little funny red yellow big	sh Sue	
Setting	FOCUS: Sentences (telling)	us use	
Mood	FOCUS: Capital Letters	BIG WORD: house (free play)	Students will share their work with the group.

APPENDIX B

ATTITUDE TOWARD READING SURVEY

Attitude Toward Reading Survey

1. I look like this when I read during free time
2. I look like this when I read about myself
3. I look like this when I get a book for a present
4. I look like this when the teacher asks me questions about what I read
5. I would feel like this if I could not read